# CALLIOPE

Vol. XIX
Spring 2022

The Student Journal of Art & Literature

# Calliope

The Student Journal of Art and Literature

Volume XIX - Spring 2022

## POETRY


| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | Mariah Salazar-Solórzano | The Good Latina | *First Prize* |
| 13 | Presley Hinkle | Meager Ressurections | *Second Prize* |
| 27 | Katie Vuong | Peeling a Clementine | *Third Prize* |
| *37* | Mariah Salazar-Solórzano | In My Mentor's Office | |
| 41 | Jessica Weiss | Patchwork Person | |
| 44 | Taveion Mickens | What if... | |


## NONFICTION


| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | Ronan Reilly | Help Me Help You | *First Prize* |
| 17 | Mariah Salazar-Solórzano | I Am Not the Mona Lisa | *Second Prize* |
| 31 | Mariah Salazar-Solórzano | The Surly Sullen Bell Has Finished Ringing, No Longer Will I Mourn for You | *Third Prize* |


## FICTION


| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 9 | Steven Rossa | The Old Woman | *First Prize* |
| 23 | Danielle Hill | Misfortune Prodigy | *Second Prize* |


## MICRO


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 35 | Steven Rossa | Crack the Ice |
| 35 | Max Schendell | The Ghost That Wasn't |


## ART


| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Christine Kim | Birds Nest | *Cover Prize* |
| 1 | Nihal Koyash | USA Wakeup | *First Prize* |
| 2 | Christine Kim | Sustainable Damage | *Second Prize* |
| 4 | Varsavhanavi Banning | Busy Refelections | *Third Prize* |
| 8 | Kaela Botts | Sweet Serenity | |
| 12 | Hatta Oemar | Conjoined | |
| 15 | Meghan Rock | Flowers in a Tin Pitcher | |

16 Robert Rodriguez Precariousness
20 Katie Vuong Chau in Robes
21 Arshpreet Kaur Unknown Flowers
22 Maryam Sofya Pomegranates Still-Life
25 Jin Ju Han Purple Night Sky
26 Maggie Gerken Overgrowth
28 Katie Vuong It Was Obsession - Part 1
29 Katie Vuong It Was Obsession - Part II
30 Katie Vuong It Was Obsession - Part III
33 Varsabhanavi Banning Cotton Candy Sunset
34 Hayden Griffith Untitled
36 Jin Ju Han Cat Cafe
39 Arshpreet Kaur Everyday
40 Hayden Griffith Local Color
42 Katherine Tran Spring 2021
43 Meghan Rock Angel
45 Xiomara Fontanez Landscape
46 Ariana Barberry Cornejo Breath
47 Nihal Koyash Somewhere in a Parallel Universe
48 Samantha Castro To You

*Calliope*, c/o The Division of Languages, Arts and Social Sciences
Northern Virginia Community College
8333 Little River Turnpike
Annandale, VA 22003-3796



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 2022 *Calliope* Chair was Til Turner.

The *Calliope* Committee and Editorial Staff include Adam Chiles, Judy Gomez, Rima Gulshan, Carole Thurston, Amy Flessert, Virginia Pates, and Kama Storie. Virginia Pates graciously and expertly curated the artwork. A special thank you goes to Kama Storie for her excellent guidance with *Calliope's* layout and design.

Our thank you also goes to the many students who submitted their creative efforts for consideration. It is only through their courage and diligence that *Calliope* continues to materialize. We received many fine works this year but were limited in the number of entries we could publish. We hope, however, that students will persist in submitting their works to future editions of Calliope.

The *Calliope* Committee extends special appreciation to Annandale faculty and staff in the following offices, divisions, and committees for their continued and generous support of this endeavor:

•The Office of the Provost
•The Division of Languages, Arts and Social Sciences
•The faculty and students of the Annandale Campus writing and art courses.

*Calliope* is indebted to Provost Dr. Pamela Hilbert, interim Provost Dr. Diane Mucci, and Dean of Languages, Arts and Social Sciences Jen Daniels for their encouragement and support. Special thanks also go to Judy Gomez and Virginia Pates in the Division of Languages, Arts and Social Sciences, and to the Purchasing Department. Each of these people has supported this journal with financial commitments and expert advice.

*Calliope* is published each spring at the Annandale campus of the Northern Virginia Community College through a collaboration of the Departments of English and Arts under the sponsorship of the Division of Languages, Arts and Social Sciences.

Submissions are welcomed from September through February each year at Calliope@nvcc.edu. Submission guidelines are available at http://www.nvcc.edu/calliope. *Calliope* reserves the right to reprint and present submitted works on the *Calliope* website and other media. Students interested in joining the *Calliope* staff as interns should contact the editors at the address above.

From the Editor -

All of us who work on *Calliope* are pleased to bring another print edition of the journal to the NOVA community. As many of us resume lives that were somewhat on hold for nearly two years, we value tangible experiences. Holding an issue of *Calliope* can be like visiting an old friend. Stephen King has said that "Books are a uniquely portable magic." The same can be said for literary journals. They can also be like witnessing events, as writers and artists share their joys, fears, and speculations.

The contributors to this issue of *Calliope* share their love of words and images with us, and we are thankful for the dedication they have to their art. In addition to amazing art work, this edition includes the first micro fiction category, which we hope to continue. This short literary form is very demanding, so it is wonderful to have a couple pieces to share. The nonfiction in this issue is emotional. The fiction is imaginative. The poetry is honest and personal.

Please take the time to savor each page of this journal. A lot of love went into it.

Til Turner
Editor



calliope *kal<e>i:opi. U.S. (Gr. Kallioph)*

(beautiful-voiced), the ninth of the Muses,
presiding over eloquence and heroic poetry.

1. An instrument consisting of a series of
steam-whistles toned to produce musical notes,
played by a keyboard like that of an organ;

2. attrib. calliope hummingbird,
a hummingbird, sellula ***calliope***, of the
Western United States and Mexico.
*Oxford English Dictionary*

*First Prize - Artwork*

Nihal Koyash

## USA Wakeup

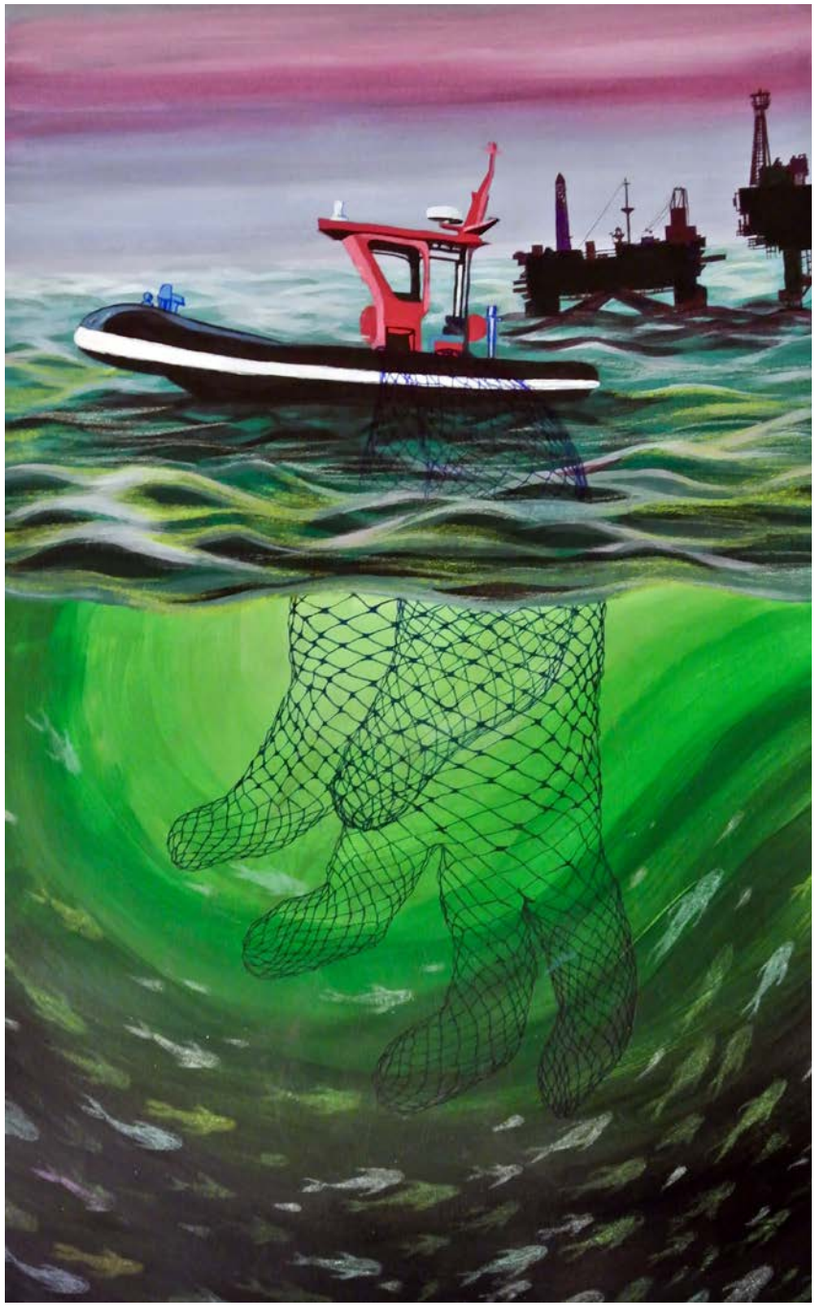
Acrylic on Canvas

*Second Prize - Artwork*

Christine Kim

## Sustainable Damage

Painting



*First Prize - Poetry*

Mariah Salazar-Solórzano

# The Good Latina

I put the hoops in my ears today,
and the skirt on my hips that my mother
said resembled the ones she tugged on
as a little girl in El Salvador.

I looked in the mirror
and wondered if I would look too Latina
sitting in my college classes,
working toward a degree in a language
my parents couldn't teach me.

A language used by my ancestors
to instill fear in my ancestors.

I wrote my name, with the accent above the O
to show pride in my heritage,
but I know the name I've grown to
love was the name that wreaked havoc
on the land my mother calls home.

A white last name that, at some point,
was no longer white enough.

I long to visit someday.
To see a crowd full of these skirts,
but I know that all I have left are tombstones
of relatives I only met once
in a sepia photograph.

I put the hoops in my ears today.
Not to be a caricature or stereotype,
but to overcome the parts within
that have demonized skirts and earrings
in hopes of being the good Latina––
the not too-Latina Latina.



*Third Prize - Artwork*

Varsabhanavi Banning

# Busy Reflections

Acrylic on Canvas Paper

*First Prize - Nonfiction*

Ronan Reilly

# Help Me Help You

When I woke up, it was still dark out, and all I heard was distant, muffled shrieking. I couldn't see anything, so I couldn't figure out where on earth that terrible, piercing sound was coming from. I was then struck by intense pain that I had never experienced before. My body ached, my brain felt like it was on fire, and it felt like I had electricity running through my veins. Everything hurt so bad I couldn't even think. No words, no self, no nothing - all I knew right then was pain. The screaming grew louder and louder, but my vision was returning. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror by my bed and saw that I was the one who was screaming. I hardly recognized myself when I saw a black eye and bloody gashes covering my face. I desperately tried to get out of bed to run and find some miracle pill to stop this pounding migraine, but when my toes hit the floor, I crumpled to the ground. In a heap on the cold, hard wood, I realized I couldn't feel my legs and no longer knew how to use them. I had no choice but to resign to my pain. Although I knew I was home alone, all I could do was cry for help.

It wasn't until later when the pain began to subside that I was able to assess the damage that had been done. I leaned wearily against my sink, staring into my bathroom mirror, and taking inventory of every injury that I found. My head was covered in goose eggs that made me wince when my fingers grazed them. My limbs and torso had been painted black and blue with bruises. My eyelids and even my tongue had been sliced and were covered in dry blood. Seeing myself that way disturbed me. I looked weak and broken, a stark contrast to the strong, brave person I had believed myself to be. All I saw in the mirror was a walking liability. Scarier than the injuries themselves was contemplating what could have possibly happened. I had slept through the night, yet somehow, I looked and felt like I had been hit by a truck. I couldn't find any logical explanations for this terrifying experience, but I did find solace in humor- because everyone looks cool with a black eye. Anytime someone concernedly asked me how I got it, my favorite response was, "Oh, it's nothing. You should see the other guy!"

Over the next year, I woke up here and there with a few bruises, broken fingers, or a throbbing headache, but nothing compared to what had happened before, so I decided to tough it out. My family and friends begged me repeatedly to go to the doctor, but I felt fine most days anyway, so who am I to complain? I had become an avid user of the phrase, "I'm fine" and an expert on living in silent fear.

One special morning in November, I woke up pain free and bursting with excitement. I had a date that afternoon and I couldn't wait. Afternoon came soon enough, which then turned to night. Hours after the sun had gone down, my date and I decided to make one final stop at an overlook on the Potomac River. It seemed like the perfect cinematic ending to what had turned out to be one of the best days of my life. We sat outside in the freezing cold, taking in the scene of calm moving water and a sky littered with stars. It was silent outside that night, and it felt like the world had been washed by a wave of serenity. There was only so much cold we could take before our limbs went numb, so we finally decided it was time to head home. I stood up from the concrete and immediately felt this strange, off-putting dizziness. It was a feeling I had never experienced before- a confusing mix of euphoria and impending doom. I began to say how dizzy I was but quickly bit my tongue, as I didn't want to worry him. And then everything turned black.

The next thing I remember is lying on a gurney in the ambulance. My vision was blurry, and I faded in and out of consciousness while paramedics took my vitals. My consciousness faded until everything turned black again. I came to, and this time I was back in his car. My date saw I had woken up and asked me how I was feeling. I had a fading migraine and didn't know where I was or what had happened, but I simply said "I feel great. Why wouldn't I?" He crinkled his face and, after a moment of pause, informed me that I had just had a seizure and began to recount what he had witnessed. As we were driving and singing along to the music, he noticed that I was no longer singing or answering his attempts to speak to me. With no warning, I suddenly began violently convulsing. That's when he pulled over and called 911. I laughed it off and told him this would make a great story in the future, but he didn't seem to find it funny.

When he dropped me off, I thanked him for taking care of me and apologized profusely for the embarrassing scene I had made, and for burdening him with such a scary situation. He raised his eyebrows in confusion. "You're apologizing… for having a seizure? It's a medical emergency and there's nothing to be embarrassed about." he assured me. "Well, I'm absolutely fine. It's no big deal and you won't have to deal with this nuisance ever again." I replied. I'm not sure if I was trying to convince him or myself, but it did happen again- many more times.

After mustering the courage, I told my dad about the whole ordeal while he looked at me in terror, his eyes widening as I continued recounting the event. I finished my story by saying, "but It's no big deal and I'll be okay." He quickly shot back in astonishment, "This is a huge deal! You are clearly not okay!" I was walking, talking, and breathing, how was I not fine? "Dad, I'm not dying. This happens all the time now. It's really no big deal." I said, becoming more frustrated. "It's not normal to feel this way all the time. You're in pain!" he seemed almost angry now. "The pain isn't that bad! I will survive and I can handle this by myself!" I was met with brief silence before my dad said something that finally clicked within me; "No one is asking you to go through this alone. People want to help you because they care for you, but I cannot help you until you let me." I realized only then that I did need help, and it didn't make me weaker to accept it.

I pushed my pride to the side and reluctantly accepted this offer of support. I began to see that this was an opportunity to end my suffering. I was now willing and able to see doctors and let them evaluate me in hopes of finding a solution. After countless consultations and CT scans, my neurologist suggested one final test- a 3-day EEG.

This was a test that required having wires glued to my scalp to read my brainwaves and detect abnormalities. By the time I left her office, I had a giant bandage wrapped around my head. It covered my hair, which had been replaced by strands of tiny, colorful wires hanging down from the gauze. I had a small black bag hung over my shoulder at all times to carry all my little wires. On the train, on the bus, and in the grocery store, I was quite a spectacle and became the object of gawking. But in my pursuit of wellness, I was left unbothered.

72 hours later, I was back for the results. As a nurse meticulously picked through my hair, removing wires and dried glue, I enjoyed a great sigh of relief as my neurologist explained my diagnosis to me. I was diagnosed with generalized epilepsy with grand mal and nocturnal episodes. A grand mal seizure is the dramatic, horror movie-esque seizure that most see in their mind when they picture epilepsy. My seizures just generally preferred to visit me in my sleep. Suddenly, all those days waking up in pain and confusion, made sense now. I finally had answers, from the black eye to the holes in my tongue. I tried to contain my elation while gripping the prescription she handed me. I was holding the cure to my fear, confusion, and pain. I walked out of the hospital that day with a spring in my step and a smile on my face. Though it was cloudy and dreary outside, to me, it was the most beautiful day I'd ever seen. I didn't have to pretend to be okay anymore, and I never woke up screaming again.



Kaela Botts

## Sweet Serenity

Digital Photography

*First Prize - Fiction*

Steven Rossa

# The Old Woman

A putrid stench fills the cold winter air throughout the entire village. This place used to be a bustling trading post with travelers and merchants from across the region, exchanging goods and stories of adventuring the wildlands over the ocean. Now, everything has fallen silent under a blanket of fog, even the rats are still. The livestock lie scattered in the fields and the streets are lined with the dead. No one is safe. Man, woman, and child lie side by side with the animals and insects of this place in complete equality. Food left out seems to have gone rotten at an unearthly pace, as have the decaying corpses of this town that even the crows have forgotten. Slowly a lone woman makes her way through all the death, walking over blackened bodies and pale eyes. She has soot on her skin and soil on her cloak, but she does not seem to mind. She is used to the aftermath of death. She seems unphased by her surroundings as she leaves her empty boat behind at the far end of town and heads towards the road leading onwards, occasionally stepping on a hand or hoof as she goes. One last look back at the carnage, scribbling something in a small leather book the old woman turns to leave. She simply moves on, erasing humanity in her wake.

The road is desolate, as is the way she prefers to travel. She navigates the dark forest along a battered dirt trail late into the darkness. Tonight, the animals are as motionless as the trees. Not even the wind dares to upset the stillness surrounding her. Not a soul is willing to share the path with her and so she walks on for an hour or two in silence. Behind her subterranean creatures sprout from the earth and shrivel, littering the road with minuscule dead bodies of moles and snakes and worms. The moon is more than enough to light her path, almost too much for her comfort. Shadows are her home and the darkness her fortress. Light can be blinding and foreign, exposing too much and giving hope for another sunrise. In due course she finds herself at the edge of the forest, reaching a clearing where the docks that provide safe passage across the river. The water has frozen here and there along the banks, and the dock is lined with several small wooden boats. They all look old and worn from years of ferrying people looking for trade up and down the river, visiting the villages on either side as they went. A single lantern is lit near the only home within sight, defiantly breaking through the blackness and the fog.

This place must be far enough removed; it was spared from the demise to the south. As she approaches the door to the lonely home the burning candle at the entrance flickers once or twice before it dies out, leaving her in darkness, the way she prefers to be. The ravens perched atop make a quick escape and take flight, perhaps knowing more than the old woman would like them too. Her fingers curl around her walking stick as she raises it to knock on the door, an old broomstick re-purposed for her long walks across a dying Earth. Its wood was worn and splintered here and there,



unnoticed by her hand from so many long journeys through small villages to larger city-states and all the towns in-between. As she taps on the door an old man's voice complains from within.

"Yes, yes I'm coming I'm coming. Wait a moment." A man, wrinkled and grey, opens the door squinting his eyes as he fixates on the woman. "Hello, I'm sorry it's hard to see in the dark for me. My sight isn't what it used to be, just a second." He grabs another candle from inside and re-lights the lantern, causing the woman to step back to the edge of the light and blurry once more to the old man's pale eyes.

"I am in need of passage across the river, are you the boatman?" she asks. The man looks puzzled for a moment, it's much too late into the night for travelers.

"I'm sorry, but you want to cross now? At this hour?"

She leans forward just barely as she looks him in the eyes, "Yes, now." It has been hard lately, with fewer and fewer travelers in need of safe passage. Some of the villages to the south are said to be cursed, entire families dying mysteriously and all but halting trade throughout the entire region. Across the sea it is worse, and cities once bustling with tradesmen and explorers have ceased to exist. No one has gone raiding to the south in months either. It is not worth the risk. Begrudgingly the old man sighs and accepts her request.

"Alright, give me a minute to gather my things." After a few short moments, the boatman returns. Lighting another lantern fixed to a long metal pole the new acquaintances walk over to the nearest dock together. As they climb aboard, he asks the woman which village she is heading towards.

"Gravamåla" she replies. Behind them, the light fades, and the boatman rows out into the river. Then, as if on command a small breeze blows out the lantern that had been outside the door to his home, returning it to the darkness she prefers.

The water is motionless, no waves splashing about or current to push against them as they go. No fish swimming around nor water spirits visiting this night. The boatman quietly paddles forward, slowly moving deeper into the river. While sitting as far away from the light as she possibly can, the woman patiently waits. The boatman appears to live alone in his small shack of a home. No one else can be heard inside, and he does not confer with anyone else about this unusually late request that dragged him from the warmth of his fire and bed. After a few moments of contemplation, the old woman pulls out the same old leather book as before. The inquisitive old man catches her shuffling about and asks, "Is everything ok?"

"Yes, just writing down some names."

The man has a puzzled expression on his face, "Names? What names might you be writing down?"

The woman looks up at the boatman and says, "Yes, names of the people I have met during my travels. I write them all down so I can remember everyone." She pauses for a moment before continuing, "What is your name?"

The man is smiling now, flattered to be taken interest in he lets his guard down he states "Jesper! And yours?"

The old woman pauses again, catching a glimpse of the shoreline she quickly changes

the subject. “Look, I think we’re nearly there. Can you see the docks?” Without hesitation Jesper looks towards the banks, squinting in the dark he can see the outline of the empty wooden boats tied off in neat rows.

“Yes, I believe so.” he replies. She quickly writes the boatman’s name at the end of her list of new acquaintances before returning the book under her cloak, safe from prying eyes.

“Thank you, Jesper. You’re a good man for taking an old woman like me safely across at such an ungodly hour.”

Jesper smiles and tells her “It’s no problem, thank you for spotting the docks for me! My eyes have gotten worse with age, soon I fear I won’t see anything at all. What did you say your name was?”

The boat slows to a halt on the muddy frost-bitten banks and the woman rises from her seat. She leans in close now, much closer than she had allowed before and whispers softly, “Pesta”.

Jesper’s eyes widen and his mouth falls open, unable to utter a word. His entire body freezes as he feels his last breath departing his throat, life escaping into the mist. “I am sorry, Jesper. It’s time I go now, but we will see each other soon, I promise. I won’t forget you; I wrote your name down as well.” The woman turns and walks away, knowing she will see Jesper again someday. Sinking to the deck of the boat as his eyes do the same into his skull, Jesper’s skin blackens and wrinkles, it tears here and there and dries before blood can spill out onto the wooden planks. Floating back out into the river the boat and Jesper both disappear into the fog.

In the distance, the old woman can see the lit walls of Gravamåla. She is near the end of her journey now and is eager to begin her final task before she can rest again.



Hatta Oemar

## Conjoined

Acrylic on Canvas

*Second Prize - Poetry*

Presley Hinkle

# Meager Ressurections

Another day,
another tug of string,
through the ridge of your back,
I make sure you're clean,
and fit for the mold,
that'll bring life
to your once
forgotten soul.

Some may call me
wicked,
but I'm no different
than them,
large or small
we are one of
the same,
only difference
being the side of life
we get to see.

I like
saving the ones
who never
stepped on ground,
drank from that trickle,
or climbed over the hills,
their souls
to preserve,
with me they'll
be safe,
with me they'll
be deathless.

When its time,
I use my most
delicate tools.
When finished,
they've got that glow,
that zeal of sun,
when spring is nigh
that fateful day
in March
on they'll go,
to greater
lengths they've
never known.

Another day,
another saved,
I set you on the shelf
with your friends and
take a step back,
there's so many
of you now,
look how far
we've come
from broken
down
shacks to
tucked away
cabin.

We've only just begun,
but I hope to find more,
and until I stitch again,
I'll just have to wait for others
to join you in your ageless
slumber.

Meghan Rock

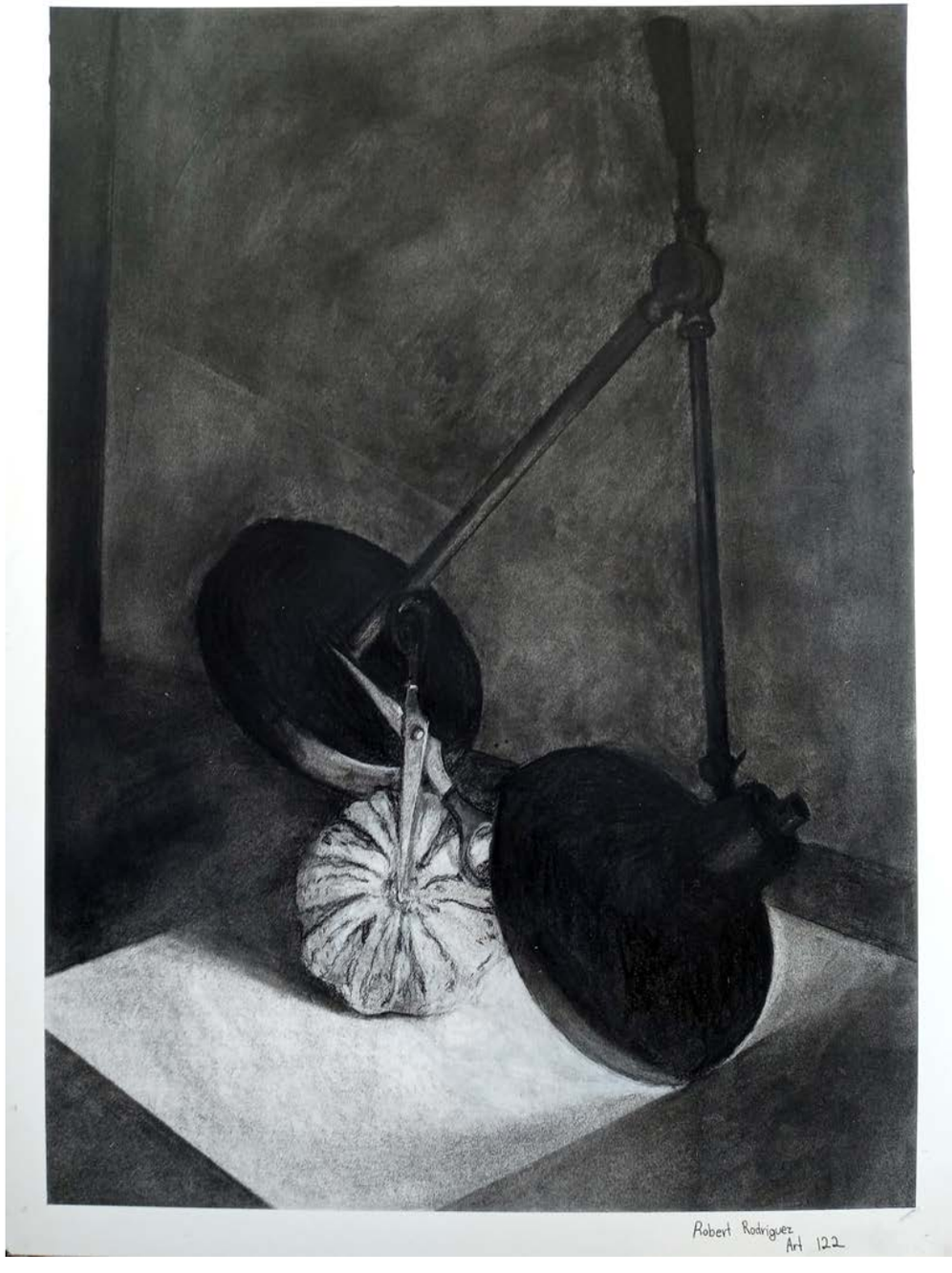
## Flowers in a Tin Pitcher

Pastel

Robert Rodriguez

## Precariousness

Charcoal



*Second Prize - Nonfiction*

Mariah Salazar-Solórzano

# I Am Not the Mona Lisa

A masterpiece gets hung on a gallery wall, not the mess that is a byproduct of its creation. I am the mess. I am imperfect, but I am beautiful and unique. I am not the Mona Lisa. I am neither perfectly proportional nor balanced. I am not a masterpiece. Rather, I am the mess in my room after a day of painting. I am the golden light that leaks through my window on to everything in my bedroom. I am the palette caked thick with dried paint. I am the brushes drowning in water. I am the stack of my unfinished paintings. That is who I am; not who I wish I was, or who I believe I have the potential to be, but who I am in this present moment. My authentic self, the complexity of my uniqueness understood through the simplicity of something common and ordinary.

I step back after having spent an entire day painting in my room and look at the disarray appreciating it for just a moment before cleaning up. There is something fascinating about the chaotic environment that has naturally unfolded itself while in my artistic element. Messes. They are typically seen as something ugly, but the mess left behind by an artist is beautiful in its own respect because it tells a story. A beautiful mess. A story telling mess. That is what I want to liken myself to. I am the mess left in my room after a day of painting. And all the other metaphors I will use to introduce myself are in a way, encapsulated by this very idea of a mess. They all work together in a synchronous harmony of strengths and weaknesses to create me in all of my beauty, ugliness, complexity, and inimitability.

I glance at my window. Golden light leaks through it. It is inviting and makes everything in my bedroom look ethereal. It makes everything glow with a honey warmth as if it were the golden touch of King Midas. I was fourteen when this light truly entered my life for the first time. I remember looking up from my tearful prayer and seeing the most beautiful golden cast, highlighting the faces of everyone around me along with my own. I carry this memory with me every day, etched in my heart and soul. No matter what troubles I find myself amongst, I find peace and hope in the one who calls himself the light of the world. And being that it is his command for me to be a light in this world, I live each day aspiring to illuminate the lives of others and my own. To radiate positivity and hope on everything the way the light from my window leaks on to everything in the room.

Layers. Depth. Complexity. I pick up my palette. I recognize these qualities within seconds but yet they remain unbeknownst to a passerby, who can only see a hard exterior covered in minimal colors, texture, and rough edges, qualities undesired by our society. A curious enough mind, however, has the ability to cut deep into these layers and become a witness to the beauty inside, to the secrets held within, to the story encoded by a thousand colors. I run my fingers over the rough top layer of paint.



To most, I am just the hard exterior. The superficial product of every person or brush stroke, the product of every major life event or rough edge. Everything from my past hidden, only a reflection of my outermost flaws and the colors that paint my current season of life. I begin to slowly peel the paint off. The unmasking of myself is what exposes the layers of rich and deep blues, vivid reds and yellows, and humdrum greys. So, those curious natures, who remain by my side, they unlock the fullness of my beauty, my intricacy, and my complete story.

A scrape of red, a dab of yellow, a bit of blue, a fix of black, a smidge of white. Mix. Swatch. Repeat. The tedious process I undergo to achieve the perfect color; the color that will evoke the intended response, that will play its part in telling a story, in sharing a message. An artist mixes each deliberate color on a palette. I cut into the dried layers of paint with a pair of old scissors. And so, what comes to be of the layered paint on the palette once it is dry is an abstract retelling of the same story the painting conveys. Cut into me and find my early childhood, a thick, muddy layer, sprinkled with color, at the bottom. Telling of my overall vague memory, but not forgetting the vivid moments of happiness, anger, jealousy, and sadness. My later childhood, thick bright stripes of fuchsia- my vivaciousness and child-like happiness- mixed with thin strips of a deep navy- the times I missed having a father, wished for my uncles' sobriety, or worried about my mother's depression. My teenage years, the top layer, a nonsensical pattern of every hue imaginable. Some layers as thin as a day and some as thick as months.

My paint brushes drowning in a cup of murky paint water. I pick one up, the bristles soaked and weighed down. They undergo a slow and constant process of evaporation, dragging on until every drop has disappeared back into the atmosphere. The bristles left bone dry and life less. I feel trapped and overwhelmed, submerged in this cup. My sense of direction absent because my vision is obscured by the thick and cloudy water that is the opinions of those whom I wish to make proud. I am weighed down not by water but by something perhaps just as fluid, my sense of identity or lack thereof due to the tight knit meshing of my desires and those my family and society have for me. The pressure of it all paralyzing me, leaving me to just wait until every drop has evaporated. Only to then realize that without any of the blindness or pressure, I am left bone dry and life less.

I sigh as I catch a glimpse of my unfinished paintings, each one a reminder of the inconsistency that presents itself in my life. A tall stack of them in a corner. Those not displayed in a prestigious gallery. Seen either as rejects, or as the admittedly easier view of works in progress. Progress because abandonment is a strong word — it feels too permanent. These products of several short-lived bursts of inspiration and motivation are compulsive by nature; they are ideas far too grand for an artist who struggles with persistence. I add the latest one to the stack. My life, a series of fragmentary paintings. No phase complete or finished. My early childhood, the first painting to be abandoned for another. Following it, a painting for every weird and awkward phase from my later childhood years. Then a plethora of vastly different paintings from my teenage years. Each one a different vague vision for my future and reflection of what or who brought me temporary joy at the time. None of them signed like a finished painting because

they are not deemed as worthy additions to the permanent collection that makes up who I want to be perceived as.

Three thousand eight hundred miles away, stands the Musee Louvre in Paris, France. On one of its walls, encased by bullet proof glass, hangs the Mona Lisa. One of the most valued paintings in the world. A masterpiece. So, why not compare myself to the Mona Lisa? Is that not what everyone desires, to be perfection? I do not! Over the years I have come to two realizations. First, I am not and will never be the Mona Lisa. More importantly however, I realized that I do not desire to be the Mona Lisa. I am relieved to instead to be the means in which a masterpiece is created. To be the aurum light, the cluttered workspace, the soaked brushes, the encrusted palette, the unfinished canvases. The Mona Lisa might be of high value, but the tools to create are invaluable. I do not wish to know the cost of perfection. I am delighted that I get to contribute to dozens of masterpieces, leaving my impact on this world through my contributions. I savor my ability to experience the world and not be kept confined behind a glass box. I cherish my uniqueness because the Mona Lisa is recreated by artists all over the world. I treasure being unfinished because the mere thought of being both eternal and finished is dreadful. I am living, and that is what is profoundly beautiful, a beauty beyond the balanced and proportional attributes of a painting. I bask in my imperfections because while I may have flaws that the Mona Lisa does not, I also get to live a life that the Mona Lisa does not, and that is everything.



Katie Vuong

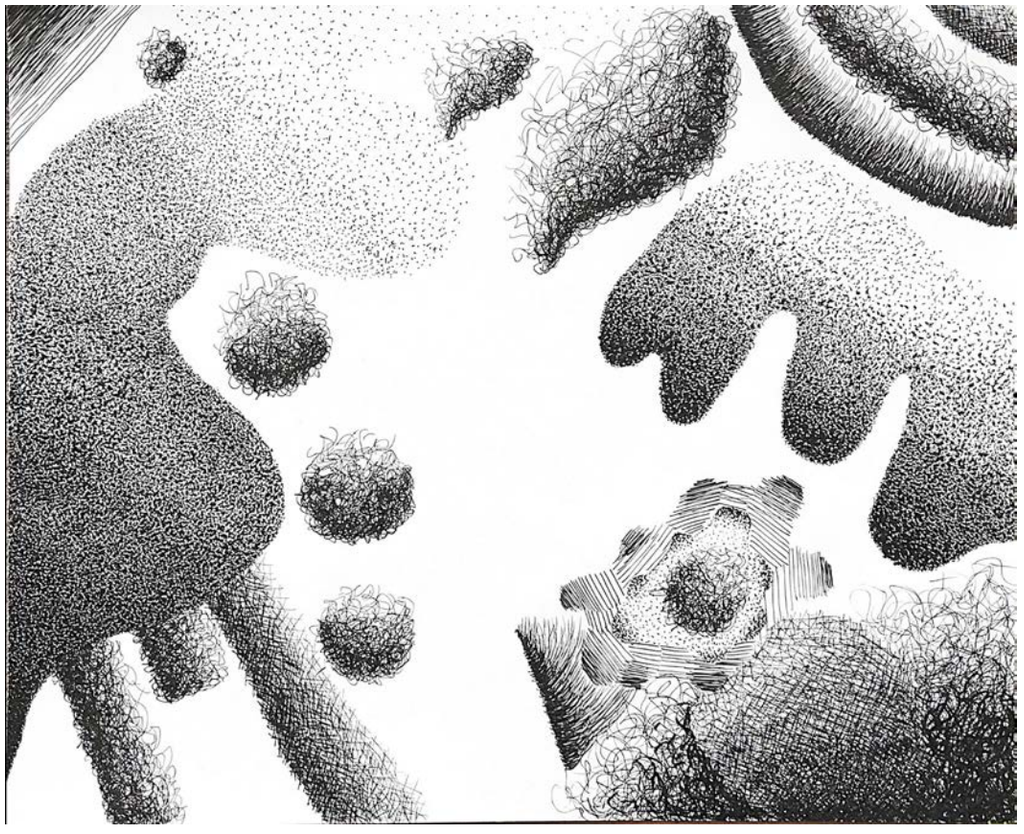
## Chau in Robes

Digital Drawing

Arshpreet Kaur

## Unknown Flowers

Ink on Bristol Paper



Maryam Sofya

## Pomegranates Still-Life

Acrylic Paint

*Second Prize - Fiction*

Danielle Hill

# Misfortune Prodigy

After the throngs of people dashed out of the circus like wildfire. Aubrey decided to go back in and find the culprit so she could teach that scoundrel a lesson for stealing her precious wallet. She wasn't worried about the money inside, even though she worked her tail off from all her mom's child labor chores. She was more concerned about a very personal slip of paper that contained an Edgar Allan Poe poem that has been in her possession as long as she could remember. The poem became withered over the years, since Aubrey frequently unfolded it at least three times a day. It was the only memento she had of her father and it made her feel closer to him even though she had never met him.

'Circus scum, you chose the wrong girl to mess with.' Aubrey thought to herself. She looked around the halfway demolished Circus and saw a small bright light beckoning her towards the stage. Everything else was pitch black.

The light eventually led to a small, mahogany caravan with red velvet drapes over each of the windows. It looked like something out of Romania, when the Gypsies traveled in their caravans with their families and life belongings trying to find a better place to roam. She stomped her way up to the caravan and pounded three times on the thick wooden door. She could smell some luscious smoke drifting through the cracks of the windows, but she couldn't quite place what it was. Poppies, maybe? Whatever it was, it made her feel woozy and she began to cough ferociously. Aubrey knocked again since there was no answer the last time. This time, a very tall gaunt man who was wearing a black satin cape opened the door very graciously.

"Ah, my child, I've been expecting you. We've all been expecting you," he rasped in a subdued manner.

"Really, you expected me to come back for my wallet. Could I have it back, so I can be on my merry way?" Aubrey couldn't help but let her fuming temper get the best of her.

"Come in, my sweet. Take a seat on the opposite side of the crystal ball on the speaking table so I can prophesize your calling. I call it the speaking table because that's where the dead and lapsed memories speak to me," the tall man explained, not even showing that her rude behavior affected him at all.

Aubrey decided to take his request because fortune tellers always intrigued her, but she made sure to put up her guard in case he pulled any funny business. She found a spot and sat carefully down across from him. There was a spread of tarot cards fanned across the table, and he asked her to select three. The first one she picked made her eyes widened like a deer caught in headlights. It was a grim reaper holding a scythe in mid-



air as if he was waiting to take a swing at someone.

"Ah, this is the death card. It signified a rebirth, a dramatic change coming into your life... Nothing will ever be the same for you again," he told Aubrey. She picked another card, and this one had the jester dancing around a pit of fire.

"This is the jester, and it is very accurate for your situation. Someone has been making you a fool, the butt of their joke. Your mother has kept you in the dark from your past and your birthright, and this has kept you from fulfilling your potential."

Good lord, Aubrey thought. How much worse could this tarot session get?

"Choose one more," the man whispered mysteriously. The last card was a big red heart with swords slicing through it.

"Yes, burning love. You're young, so why shouldn't you have a blooming romance in your future? Although from what I can tell, this love will consume you like no other and might drag you down when it perishes in flames. Love is like that, a happily ever after that's sugar coated through your eyes, but pretty soon reality has to demolish it." The tall man sighed.

"Do these cards really signify my future or are you just a big phony trying to petrify me?" Aubrey asked impatiently.

He was about to answer until Aubrey went as stiff as the dead and overcome with a vision that was quick and ferocious as lightning. She saw a woman with soft pale skin, and she was crying into the arms of a cloaked man. She couldn't see their faces, but the woman was wearing a very familiar hummingbird pendant around her neck. Aubrey recognized it immediately. It was her mothers. The fortune teller clapped his hands in front of her face, which snapped her out of her reverie. She jumped out of her seat while giving him a bewildered look.

"All right, bucko! You had your fun, so no more games. Give me my wallet back, and I promise not to tell anyone about this blabbering nonsense you call a seance!" Aubrey's patience was wavering, and she had this strange urge to run for the hills... like now. The man shook his head and looked at her with something like pity in his faded bluish eyes.

"I'm sorry, child, but your fate has now been sealed," he crooned. Before she could even blink, the entire caravan began to shake so hard, just like a ticking clock gone haywire. Aubrey dashed towards the door, but noticed the two acrobats were blocking it. She growled under her breath when they wouldn't let her pass.

"Get out of my way, you dirty thieves!" She exclaimed while trying to get around them. They both gave each other their infamous devious grins until they blew a hazy smoke ring around her face.

"What the hell, you guys? Don't you know smoking causes cancer?" Aubrey began to protest, but suddenly started feeling a queasiness in the pit of her stomach before she could form another syllable. The caravan seemed as far away and foggy as a lighthouse on a stormy night, and she felt lost at sea. She looked around to find the tall fortune teller, but he was no longer recognizable, and his face looked like the devil himself.

The walls seemed to bleed into the furniture, and the ceiling came down toward her like a prowling spider from its web.

"So, what does the boss want from this little short fry? What could she possibly contribute to the circus?" Taylor asked his twin.

"Not sure, brother, but let's have some fun and make her our new plaything for a while," Tyrion announced mischievously to his brother.

The twins began to drag her by her feet to bring her to their master. If they did let the seance go on just a little longer, they would have found out that she would be their newest ringmaster soon enough. And things would change so drastically that they'd probably choose to jump now from the acrobatic high wire.

Jin Ju Han

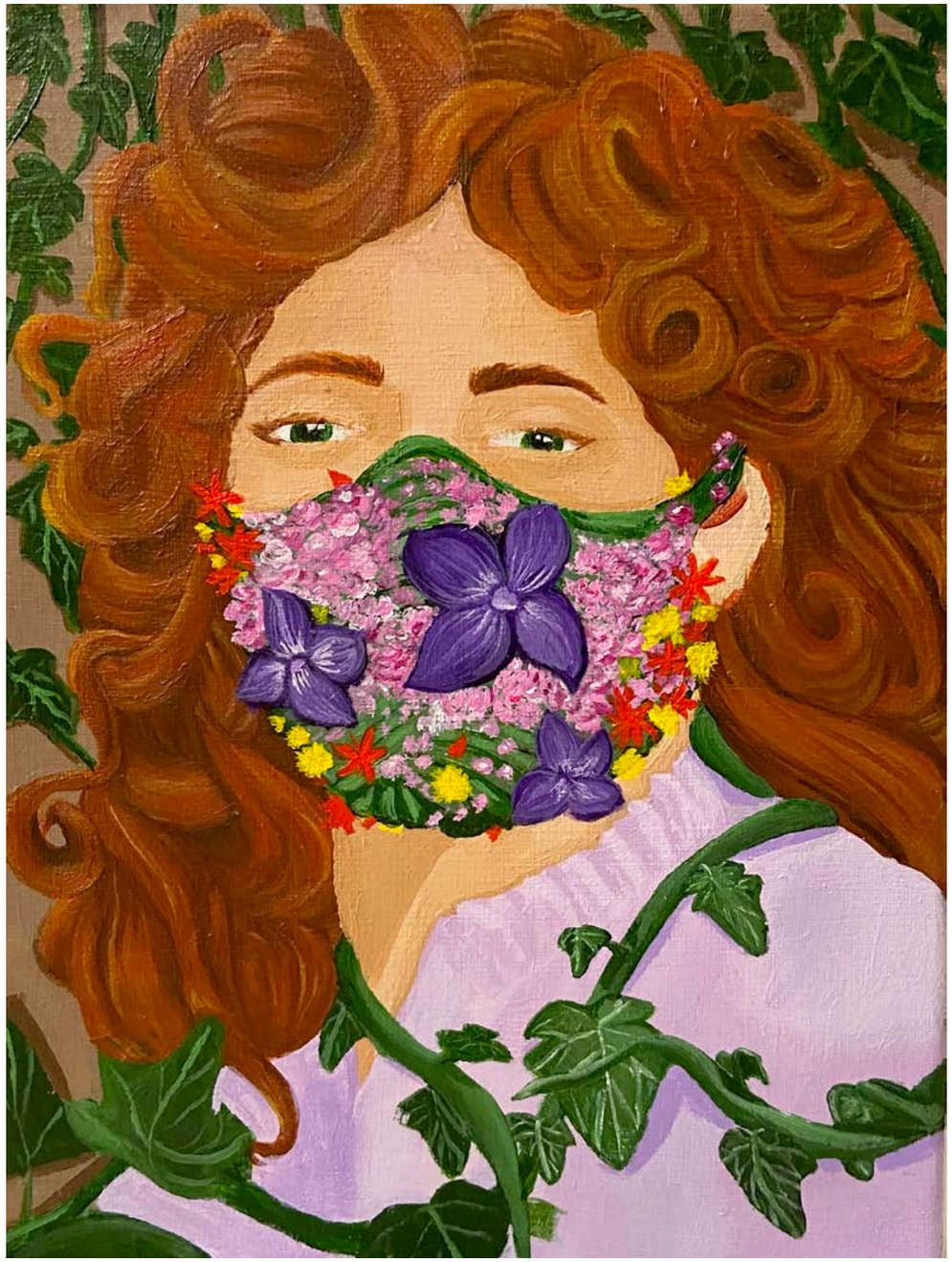
## Purple Night Sky

Digital Illustration

Maggie Gerken

## Overgrowth

Acrylic on Canvas



*Third Prize - Poetry*

Katie Vuong

# Peeling a Clementine

My dull nails break the skin, causing sharp-smelling sap to drip
down my hands. The fruit is ripe to bursting.
I am so
full.

Yet I still drag my thumb around its waist, cupping its
curves with a deft potter's hand. Carving it off in one
whole
piece.

The peel cakes in my nails, dusts my fingertips.
Even if I scrub them raw, the biting
fragrance
lingers.

I pull apart the small petals one by one. I was too careless
when peeling off the skin, left deep bruises that won't heal. I lift the broken petal to my
lips and
drink
deeply.

I only wanted one clementine. I drop another curling peel on the pile
of broken skin; make a mountain of a molehill. I eat the
whole
tree.

I don't know what I want, really.
I go to bed with my hands cupped before the broken bend of my nose. I breathe deep
and hold
my
breath.

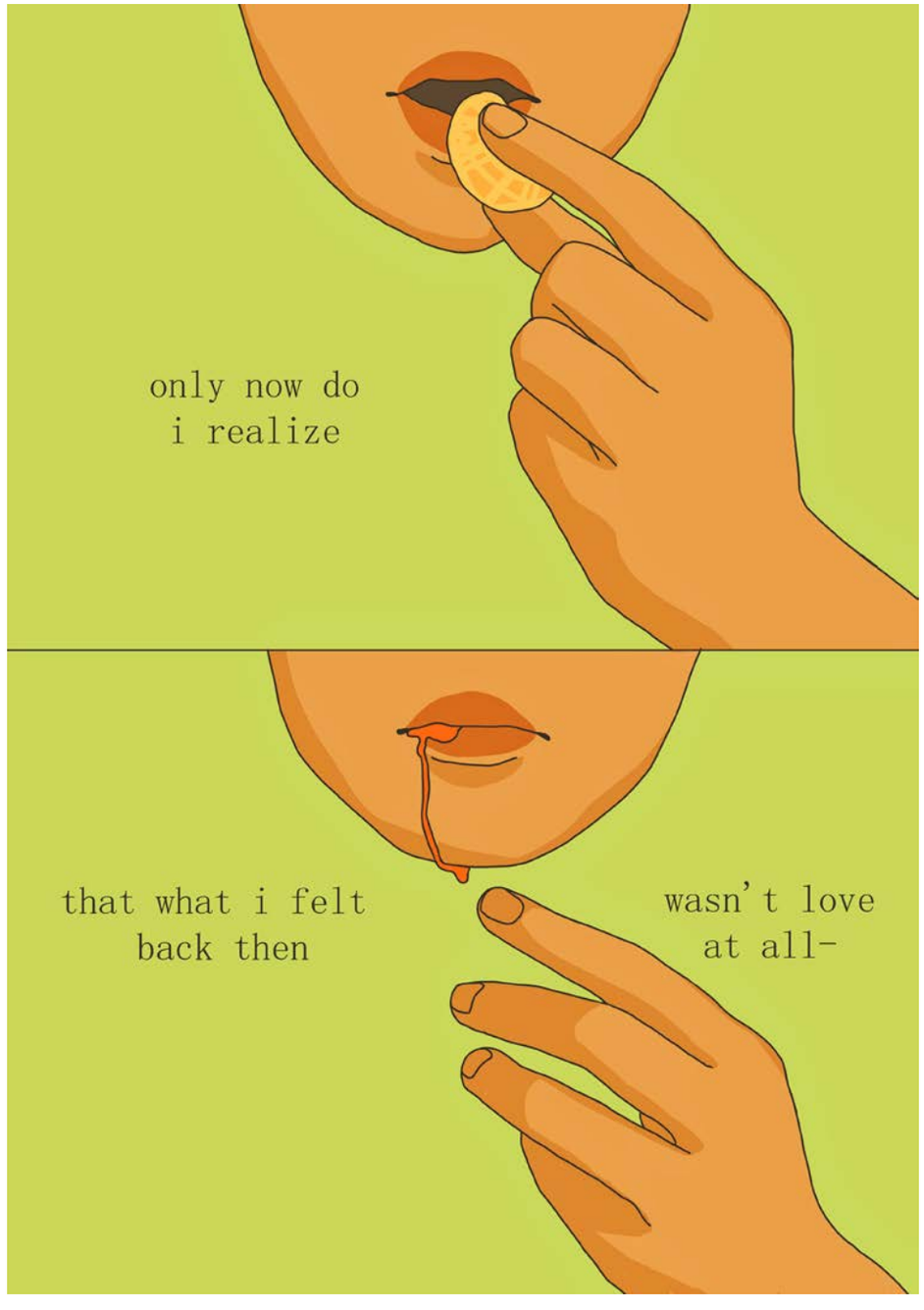
I am so tired. The moon begs me to sleep and let
the craters beneath my eyes heal where hers could not. Yet I lie awake 'til sunrise
waiting for that terrible
scent
to fade.



Katie Vuong

# It Was Obsession - Part I

Digital Drawing



Katie Vuong

# It Was Obsession - Part II

Digital Drawing

Katie Vuong

# It Was Obsession - Part III

Digital Drawing

*Third Prize - Nonfiction*

Mariah Salazar-Solórzano

# The Surly Sullen Bell Has Finished Ringing, No Longer Will I Mourn For You

No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From the vile world, with vilest worms to dwell.
Nay, if you read this line, remember not
The hand that writ it, for I love you so
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot
If thinking on me should make you woe.
O, if, I say, you look upon this verse
When I, perhaps, compounded am with clay,
Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,
But let your love even with my life decay,
Lest the wise world should look into your moan
And mock you with me after I am gone.
(Sonnet 71)

My junior year of high school I fell back in love with writing, with poetry. As a child I loved writing, and I wasn't precious about it at all. I've kept stacks of journals and notebooks with my writing from childhood, and I admire the creativity sprawled across the pages in soft, messy lead. Years ago, I must have misplaced my favorite of the bunch, a poetry collection. I wrote it when I was ten in the school computer lab, and then I printed each one out and bound it together with the help of a hole punch and yarn.

Somewhere along the way I lost my love for poetry, it stopped being fun and grew intimidating. I stayed away from reading poetry until I was assigned Carol Ann Duffy my junior year of high school. Maybe those few poems wouldn't have made such an impact if I had had a different teacher, but Mr. Nelson changed the way I looked at writing, the way I looked at words. Duffy's poetry made sense and it was beautiful. Her poems felt welcoming to the genre. Each one made me both wish I had been the one to write it first and believe that I could have. But I remained, still scared of poetry, Duffy had just become my safe little corner within the world of poetry.

As my junior year came to a close, I had one final exam left. I had the option between three different texts to write about for my English final, and amongst those was Sonnet 71. I remember standing in front of the three stacks of paper and seeing my classmates' hands reaching quickly for the copy of whichever text they wanted as I stood frozen for a moment not sure what to pick. I deliberated in my mind, suddenly scared of every option, and then reached for Sonnet 71.

I walked out of my English final inconsolable. When I had sat down to write, I blanked. The sounds of busy fingers on keyboards seemed to spin in the air of the room, but the air near me was silent and stale. I wrote words but they weren't the right ones. I must have pressed the delete key more than any other that day. When the last bell of my junior year rung, I felt the pit of my stomach drop in defeat. I was tempted to delete everything and submit a blank file, but I submit what little I had and headed out.

I went home that day and cried, I convinced myself I would never write anything that bad again, and––as any angsty, dramatic teenager would do––I created a playlist with all the saddest songs I knew and titled it "English Final Exam." The songs looped as I played the events of my final exam over and over again in my head. The blank computer screen in front of me, the delete button being held down until it was stuck, and the sound of success on every other keyboard. I thought of the words I had written, and they sounded increasingly awful the more I thought about them.

From that point forward, whenever poetry came up in conversation, I led with an apology and disclaimer about how terrified and awful I was with poetry. I always found myself coming up with ideas for poems but being too scared to write them down. I loved the ideas too much and wanted to do them justice, but I had convinced myself I would only butcher them. During my first year of college, I felt like I couldn't escape poetry anymore, not because I was assigned it, but because it wouldn't leave my mind. I thought about poetry while washing dishes, grocery shopping, arguing with my mom, and every other moment in between. Finally, I grabbed a notebook just as I had when I was a child and wrote down the various strings of words that lived in my mind, leaving them there where they were safe with the hope to return to them someday.

That was only a few months ago, and I've already returned to a handful of those pages and turned them into completed poems. I've stopped feeling that my place in poetry is in a corner with Duffy poems clutched against my chest. I am only at the humble beginnings of my poetry endeavors, but I allow myself to read, write, and enjoy poetry now (which I will take as an accomplishment!) So, then, I feel that it is only appropriate to release myself from the grip I've allowed this beautifully depressing sonnet to have on me with a… poem.

Dearest Sonnet 71,

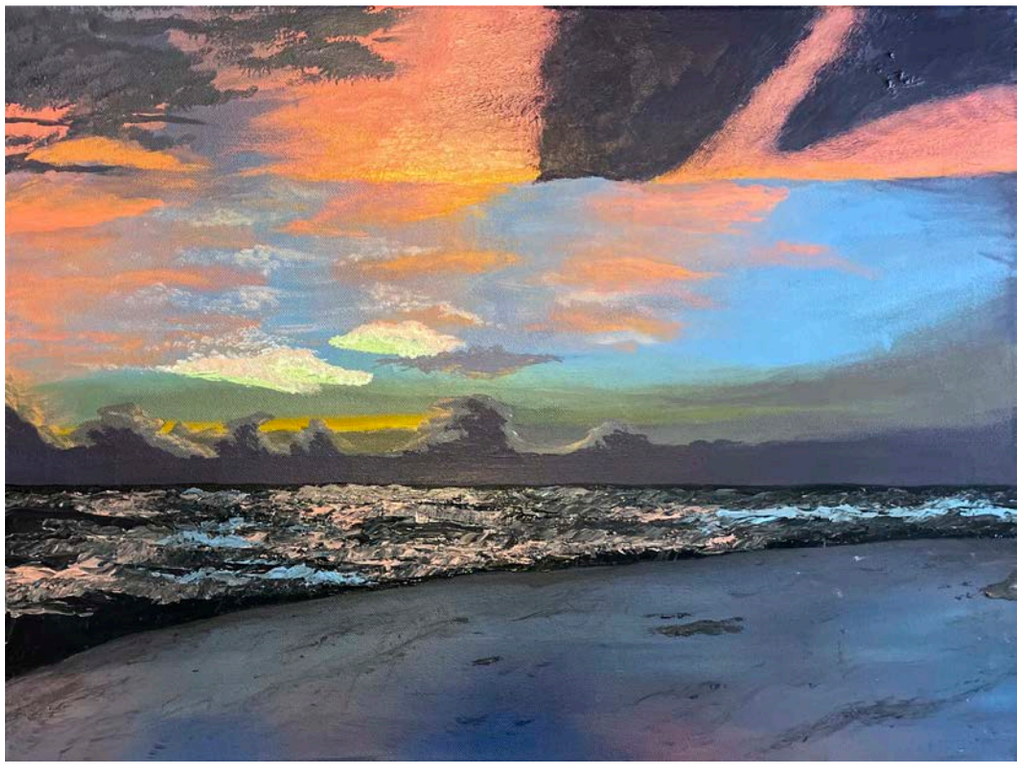
No longer will I mourn you, tears in bed
Than I shall write this and say my farewell.
Give warning to the world that I have fled
From the vile thoughts, that made poetry my hell.
Nay, when I read you again, I won't be fraught.
The words I hated I now borrow so

That you in my sweet thoughts would be forgot
If thinking on you should make me woe.
O, if, let's say, I look upon your verse
When I, perhaps, am asked to study a play
Do not wait for fear to place me in a hearse
But let my novel love for poem stay
Lest the wise words should wish to hear me groan
And mock them once more, for I now move on.

Varsabhanavi Banning

## Cotton Candy Sunset

Acrylic on Canvas

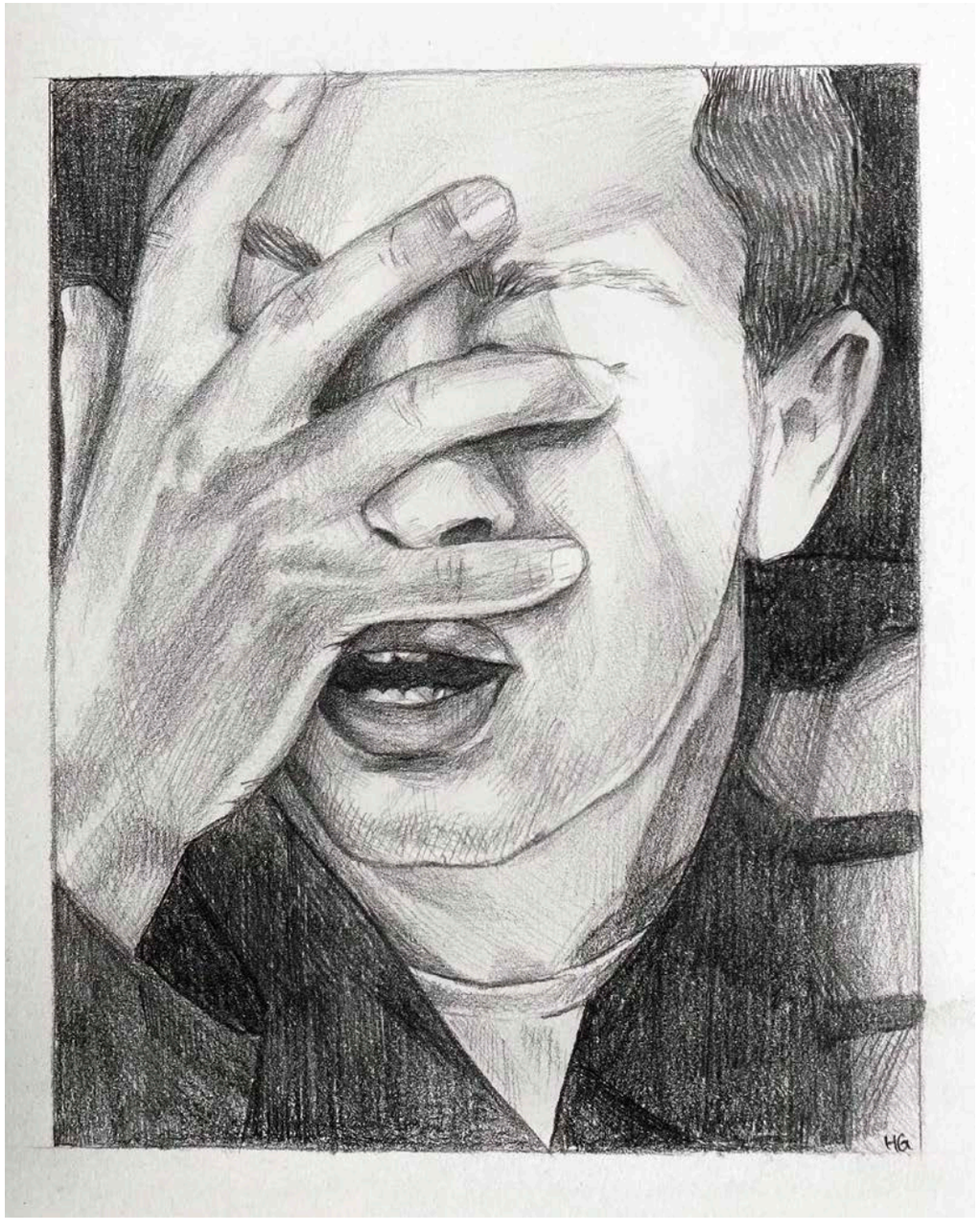




Hayden Griffith

## Untitled

Graphite on Paper



*Micro Fiction*

Steven Rossa

## Crack the Ice

Out of the forest and onto the frozen water they came after him. The taste of warm blood consumed their minds. In the distance was his hunting lodge, an old log cabin built so many seasons ago the dead walls had new life of their own sprouting here and there. He had dreamed of bringing his son to this place.

They surrounded him now, leaving no route for escape. If this was the end, he would die on his own terms. Janne raised his axe upward, staring death in their eyes just before slamming it back down onto the ice.

*Micro Fiction*

Max Schendell

## The Ghost That Wasn't

Tom and Lisa arrived home just before midnight, as Tom had promised his teenaged sister, Carolyn. They were comfortable leaving their infant in Carolyn's care. Expecting to find Carolyn asleep on the couch in the den, instead, when they stepped inside, she ran into Tom's arms, crying. "I told you this house was haunted! Something has been knocking on the closet door at the end of the hall all night!" Laughing as he took Carolyn's hand, Tom led her to the closet and pulled the door open, revealing an old, sputtering water heater and the banging pipes leading from it.



Jin Ju Han

## Cat Cafe

Digital Illustration

*Poetry*

Mariah Salazar-Solórzano

# In My Mentor's Office

*for Cheri, Melanie, Nicole, and Paul*

In my mentor's office (before they're my mentor)
I introduce myself and tell them I just want to learn.
I don't need a letter grade, I'm ready to learn a new way of being
as I'd come to learn they called it.

In my mentor's office I share my insecurities
and the phrase "imposter syndrome" comes up.
I shake my head, it's not a syndrome. I really am an imposter.
They assure me I am not, and my vision glosses over.

In my mentor's office I pick at the hangnails on my thumbs
as I study the expressions on their face
while they read—for the first time—the words I've carefully crafted.
"So, how do you feel about it?" they ask, and

In my mentor's office I freeze.
How can I tell them I'm proud of myself, but still guard myself from disappointment?
"I think it's an okay start" I lie. Really, I think it's my best work yet,
but I worry the grammar gives me away for the fraud I am.

In my mentor's office I tell them the things I care about,
but believe to be too trivial. Apologizing and diminishing along the way
"It's just little things—" I begin. They cut me off to tell me
it's not a little thing to feel unheard, under-represented, uncared for.

In my mentor's office my eyes go wide, and my speech goes fast
as I tell them about my new enlightening experience.
I sense that it reminds them of themselves at my age, and I soak in the
unwavering support, wisdom, encouragement, and joy.

In my mentor's office I cry when I am forced to come to terms
with my humanness. my hands begin to shake. I have to admit that this time
I didn't finish writing. I barely even started. "How do you feel about it?" they ask.
Tears well up in my throat and I can't get out a word.



In my mentor's office I begin to believe that I made the right choice
coming here, to a community college. I begin to understand
the significance behind the word "community" and I begin
to allow their pride to outweigh my family's disappointment.

In my mentor's office they say, "I was talking about you to a friend the other day."
and I wonder if they get as much out of our conversations as I do.
Could they really think about me outside of this room?
"I really hope so." I say to my own friends, later, on the phone.

In my mentor's office I break down when I haven't slept in four days
and I'm working two jobs, and I'm behind in all my classes,
and my mom has cancer, and I'm going through a break-up, and I can't breathe.
I learn that the tissue box on their desk is not just for decoration.

In my mentor's office I am invited to sit on a cushion, and
after a while, I grow to love the stillness.
I am invited to breathe and practice mindfulness, and
after, I am given a mug and poured a cup of scalding tea.

In my mentor's office I plop down and say
"I think I want to try something out…tell me if it's crazy"
They look at me as if they knew the day would come all along
and suddenly my crazy idea feels not-so-crazy.

In my mentor's office I pick their brain
"Do you ever…" I begin. Yes.
The answer is almost always yes.
They reassure me I am not alone.

In my mentor's office I learn about academic families
as they tell me all about the ones they've fostered
and again, my eyes gloss over with happy tears.
I wonder if it is too soon to claim them as part of mine.

Arshpreet Kaur

## Everyday

Graphite on Drawing Paper

Hayden Griffith

## Local Color

Pastel Pencil on Bristol Board

*Poetry*

Jessica Weiss

# Patchwork Person

Dad says I look just like Mom.
Displeasure shaped like the twist of her lips:
the spitting image of her anger

Mom says I sound just like Dad.
An echo of how he'd poke fun and laugh until his sides hurt with it.
She doesn't say it like a compliment.

There's kindness in my veins, forced there by my sister.
Enough that my softened heart will surely kill me one day,
wearing it on my sleeve where the whole world can see.

I am a patchwork person.
Gorging myself on the stolen pieces
of all the people I've loved.

Bullheadedness from my grandfather,
charm from my grandmother.
Competition pushed to the point of brutality
learned at the kitchen table
surrounded by the outraged swearing
of my laughing uncles.

I stole adulthood from my second mother.
Watched her confront life with her feet planted and head raised high
until I could imitate it like a child playing dress up.

A taste for fiction - for escapism and eccentricities -
I found tucked beneath my heart, placed there by my mother's brother.
He knew I'd need it as I grew, too similar for our own good.



Katherine Tran

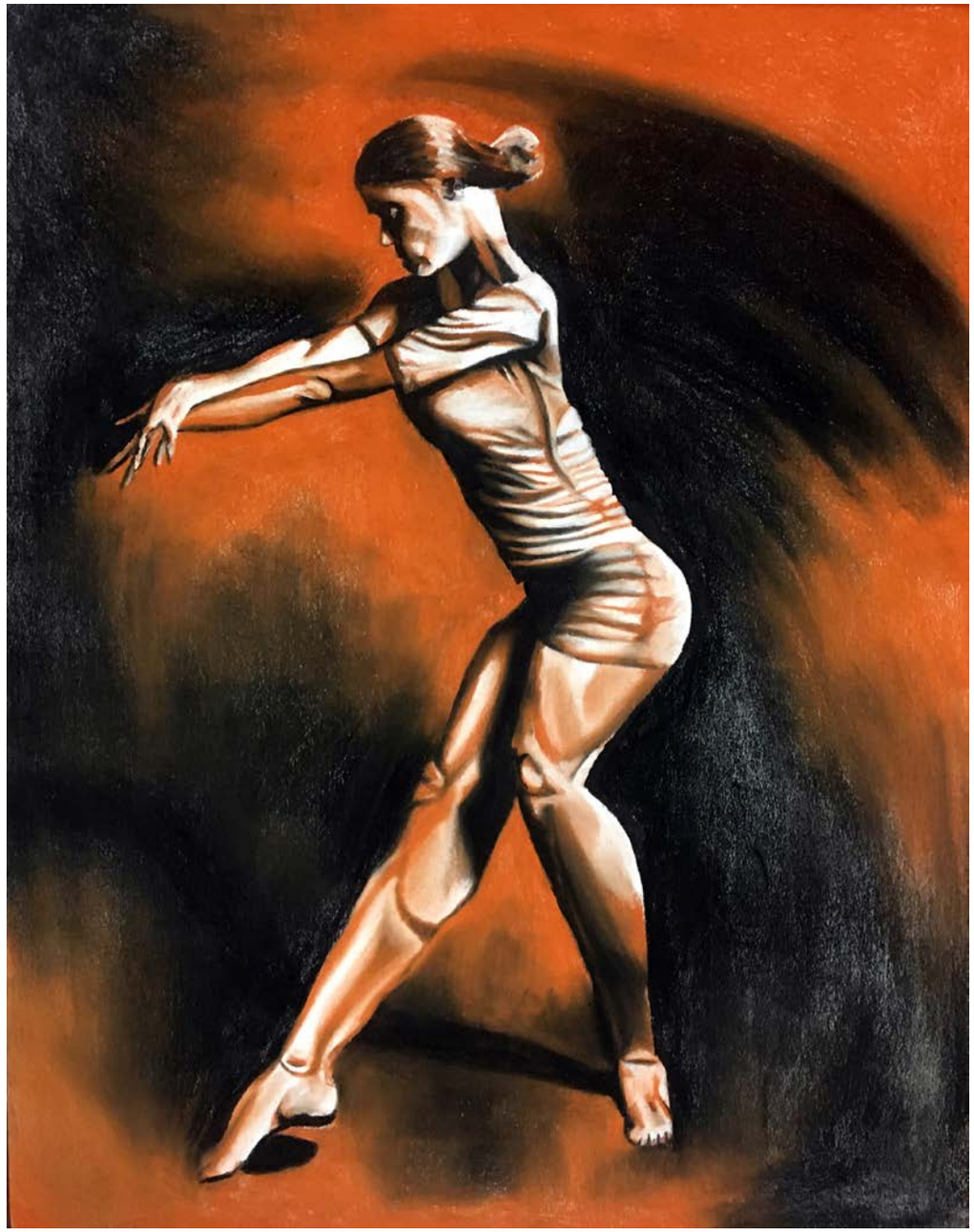
# Spring 2021

Acrylic on Paper

Meghan Rock

## Angel

Conte Crayon





*Poetry*

Taveion Mickens

## What if...

What if I told you that my mind was in depression?
And my emotions were made of steal
“Heart been broke so many times”
But I just want it to heal
What if I told you...
that my life had no obsession
And my dreams have no passion
Like the salad without the dressing
What if I told you ...

That these tears bring me closure
And I’m trying to sit up straight
But I keep losing my composure
What if I told you...
these crooked smiles bring me pain
I try to picture no depression
But I can’t seem to escape the frame
Mind racing
Clout chasing
I’m Just waiting on a breakthrough

In breaking news
Another black brother taking a bullet
That’s breaking you
They are blaming one
But it takes two
Another motherless child
Without her son to
It’s taking you
it’s breaking me
Another legal gun that breaks a family tree
But what if I told you...

That they got nothing to lose
But I got something to gain
What if I told you…
That I’m tired of the sun burn

So, I rather be in the rain
Would you really believe me?
Or would you receive me as broken
Would you really take my seriousness?
As a symphony token?

Xiomara Fontanez

## Landscape

Photograph

Ariana Barbery Cornejo

## Breath

Paper Cutting

Nihal Koyash

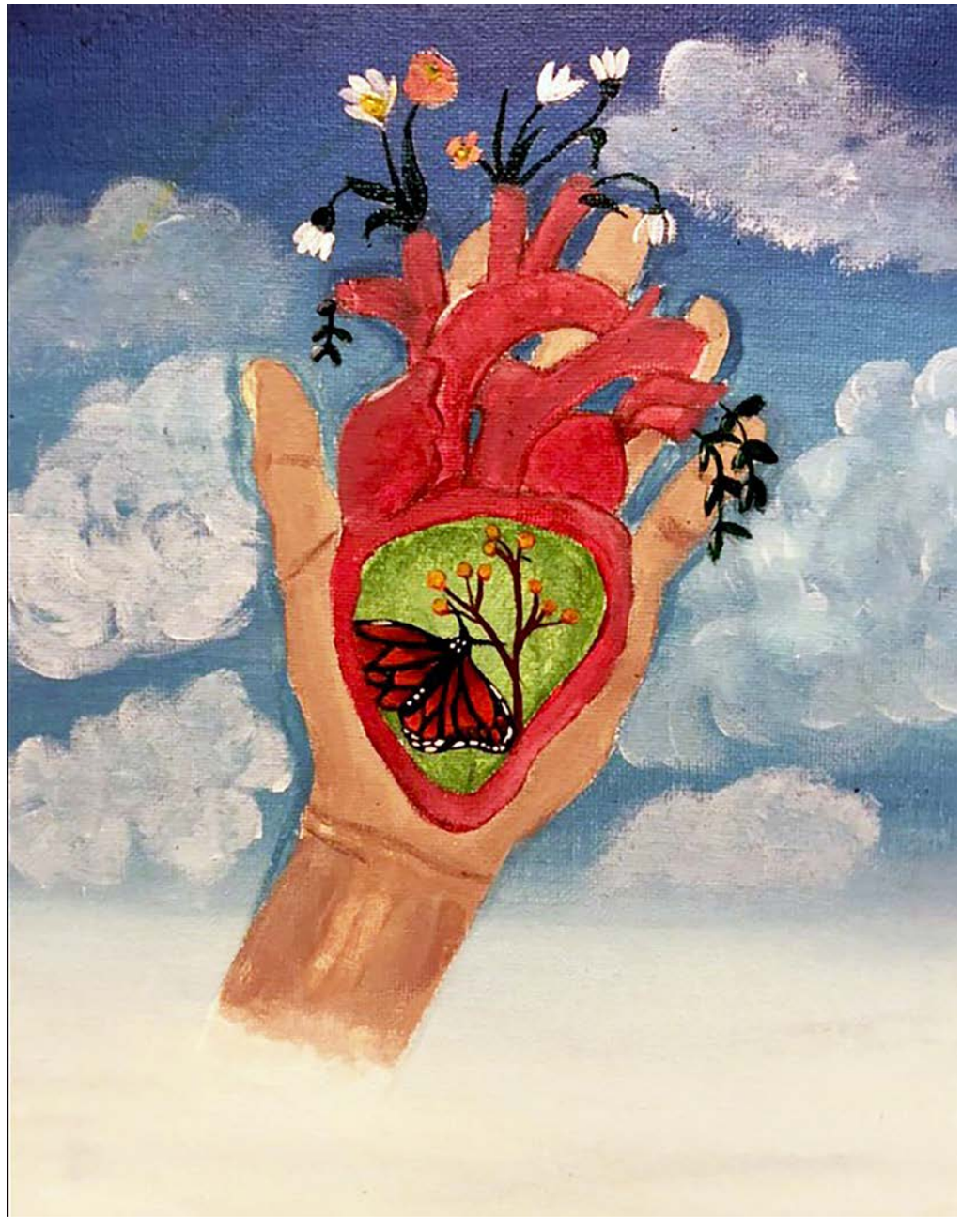
## Somewhere in a Parallel Universe

Acrylic Paint

Samantha Castro

## To You

Acrylic Paint



NOVA | Northern Virginia Community College